

The Second Appraisal of the Rabbit Hole

Exhibit A: Border Checkpoint

I land hard on my ass in the soft dirt. One thing they don't tell you about going down the rabbit hole: the fall might be thrilling, but the landing is never graceful. No matter how well you think you've prepared.

Something else they won't tell you is how easy it is to fall. One second you're on a hike in the mountains, or you're crawling into a wardrobe, and the next second you're somewhere else. "Somewhere else" might look like where you've just been, too—you might not even notice anything's changed until a beaver starts talking to you.

The first thing I do then is breathe in the woodland air. The chill stings my nose and I catch the faint scent of something sweet. Not sweet like sugar. Sweet like coppertone sunscreen. I grunt as I stand up, rubbing the back of my right leg. That's gonna be sore for awhile, I bet.

This is definitely the clearing I remember. It's flat, even, and impossibly round. Like a child's drawing of a clearing. It's smaller, though—when I was a kid, I felt like it stretched out, like a grand ballroom. Now, its size makes me feel more like I'm in the reception room at a funeral home. I guess that's a funny thing about memory. It's never quite right. I get the feeling I'm going to be learning a lot of funny things about memory today.

I look up next. There's no ground or dirt above me, like you'd expect after falling deep, deep down a hole. It's just the trees and an open gray sky above. It's weird, but also the exact kind of thing I've mentally prepared myself for. Otherworlds are a headache and a half.

I shrug my shoulders a bit to pull my backpack tighter over them and start walking. There's only one path out of the clearing, and it's just as pristine and level as the clearing itself. As I walk past the thick brush, I notice that, other than my footsteps, it's completely silent. That's

weird, obviously, but I can't remember if it's weird for this place. Were there birds the last time we were here? I probably wouldn't remember hearing something like that, but I would remember *not* hearing it, right? I guess I mostly remember crying.

I've been walking for a couple minutes when I notice that there's something blocking the path a little ways away. I squint. It's a building. A little further, and I see that it looks like a log cabin. Or maybe a bit more like a little office, like one you'd find outside of an old train station. I slow down a bit, trying to think of my next step. I'm not going back the way I came, obviously, and when I say the woods lining the path are thick, I mean it. I'm being railroaded, hard. I'm getting a bad feeling, but then, it's not like I was expecting to enjoy the trip. I crack my knuckles—just an impulse. I am here for one thing, I remind myself, opening the door.

It's cozy inside. It looks a lot like a waiting room. Not a waiting room like at a doctor's office, but like at a therapist's office. I'm familiar with one of those two places. A lamp in the corner is casting an inoffensive yellow light on a line of cushioned chairs, and a few potted plants and bookshelves are evenly distributed along the wall. Across from me is a desk with a brown-haired woman behind it and a door identical to the one I am stepping through. She has dull, nubby horns protruding a couple inches out of her head. She's reading a magazine, and doesn't look up when I shut the door behind me, though I do see her eyes shift a bit from where I am. I clear my throat, and then approach the desk. I'm not certain of what I should be doing in this exact situation, but I should probably do my best to act like I am.

“Hi,” I say. So we're off to a great start.

“Business,” says the faun.

“Sorry?” I say. I am suddenly aware of the fact that I do not know what to do with my hands. I try to place them in my jean pockets, but then opt for clasping them together right in front of me. I do not feel less awkward.

“State your business,” she says.

I feel my face tense up, and I blink a couple times. I wasn’t expecting this kind of question.

“I’m looking for someone,” I say.

The faun sets down her magazine now.

“Hm. Can’t say I hear that one very often.” There’s a hint of humor in her voice. “Most people want directions. They want to know which way home is. What’s your name?”

“Esther,” I say, putting my hands back in my pockets.

The faun is rifling through some papers in a desk drawer now. I scan her desk a bit. She keeps it neat and clear, besides the magazine. There’s a nameplate to her right. Eunice.

“Well, alright, Esther,” Eunice says, pulling a clipboard in front of her. “Who’s your friend?”

“Alice,” I say. “I’m not really sure you could call us friends. We were, once, but... yeah, I don’t know.”

Eunice stares up at me for a few seconds before realizing that I am not going to elaborate. It doesn’t matter, it seems; something else occurs to her.

“Say, Esther,” she starts, “you look a little older than most kids who come through here. How old are you?”

“Twenty-two,” I say.

Eunice whistles. Someone like me coming through here is unusual for a lot of reasons. I understand that, at least.

“You came here by choice?”

“Yes,” I say, and I wonder if Alice did, too. It’s the kind of stupid thing she would do.

“How did you know about Woodreach?” This question is just business, like the rest.

“I’ve been through once before.”

“... And you hated it.”

I frown.

“What do you mean?” I say.

“Am I wrong?”

“No, but—”

“It’s written all over you, Esther,” she says. “That’s alright. It takes a special kind of person to like it here.”

I feel that sentence carving out space in my brain.

“I’ll just say,” she continues, “that Alice must be a pretty important person to you.”

I consider this for a second. I’m not sure that’s right. But then again, why else *would* I be here? I end up saying

“It doesn’t really seem professional for you to say that.”

Eunice shrugs.

“I’m not really being paid.” She puts down the clipboard, scribbles a couple more notes, then files away the sheet in her desk. She picks her magazine back up. “You’re cleared to enter.

I’m not even actually able to stop you.”

I squint, and consider asking her some questions. I decide to press on—you can't hope for straight answers in a place like this, and I don't feel much like wasting time. I leave.

“Come on, Esther. Why are you crying?”

Esther was sitting on the ground, her face on her knees.

“Alice, I don't like it here. I wish we hadn't come.”

Alice crossed her arms.

“Esthie, you're the one that wanted to go.”

Esther twitched through a few more sobs.

“That goat man... he was scary. I don't think I'll like the people here.”

“Don't be a baby,” Alice said. “We'll go home, but you have to stop crying like that.”

Esther wiped her eyes and nose with her forearm and nodded her head. She had never felt so small in her life.

Alice offered her hand and pulled Esther off the ground. Esther sniffed for a few more minutes as they pressed on through the woods. Alice knew she should have been scared—they were lost in a strange place and didn't know how to get home. She knew this, yes. But all she could think about was the fact that she had never felt so free in her entire life.

Exhibit B: Hedge Maze

Woodreach is one of those otherworlds that can look a lot like home. If I'm being honest, that pisses me off—if something weird can look like something you're familiar with, how can you trust anything at all?

Outside the border checkpoint (it might as well have been this) is an open green field, with a dirt path leading up a steep hill. The field is lush. It should be beautiful, if not for the menacing sky above. It looks more like an apocalyptic version of the Windows XP background.

I work my way up the hill on the path, and it takes longer than I expect. I get a feeling I've felt before, like a kind of dread that you keep approaching a point but it never gets any closer. The stairs to my dad's old apartment were like that, too. I do make it to the top, though, and the feeling passes, but now it's been replaced by a different feeling.

Down below, on the other side of the hill is a thick row of hedges, taller than me, forming a long wall out to either side as far as my sight goes. I sigh. I definitely remember this. The dirt path leads to a small opening in the thicket—rectangular, curved at the top, like an arch.

Near the entrance, I think the words *For Alice*. In my heart, something responds *Why?*

It's still eerily quiet out here, but when I step into the hedge maze, a breeze sweeps through, playing the bush like a bunch of little hi-hats. The walls are narrow, just broad enough for me and a foot of space on either side. It freaks me out, but it's not like I'm claustrophobic. I press forward, seeing the dirt path steadily transition into the grassy floor of the labyrinth. The path hooks left first, and then after a few meters, it branches two ways: forward and left. I take a beat, brushing my hand against the right wall and moving straight ahead.

There's a trick to mazes that most people know. It's almost a cliché: if you trace along one wall consistently instead of going in random directions, you'll eventually have to reach the exit. It's stupid to think that anything is going to make sense in this place, but I at least have to try my way before playing by its rules. The path takes me right, then left, then right again. After a few minutes of tracing, I come to what looks a bit like a courtyard. It's a square space with one

exit on either side. Across from me is a small stone bench, which has a thin viridescent stalk growing up one of its legs. Things can be reclaimed by nature even somewhere like this, I guess.

I keep tracing the wall, exiting this area to the right. About a minute or so later, this takes me on a branching path to the right, then right again, and then left. Walking down the straight, singular path after this turn, I enter an open square area. An exit left, an exit right, and a bench. A bench with a thin stalk growing up one leg (it's the back right leg, by the way). I'm certain it's a coincidence and not the same place. That isn't physically possible. I tell myself this, knowing that fact doesn't matter at all. I take the right exit again, and then go right, right, left. I'm staring at the bench again. I roll my eyes. I exit, then go left, right, left, and I'm back. I take the left exit this time, just for a laugh. The path veers right, right, then left. You'll never guess.

I plop down on the bench, leaning forward and letting the weight of my backpack fold me in half. Okay, so it's some kind of puzzle. A specific set of directions, maybe? I mean, of course, but do I just guess until I get it? I should probably at least try that. Alice and I must have been through here before, right? I kind of remember that. So why can't I remember getting out?

"Are you perhaps lost?" a bell-like voice says from above me. I spring to my feet.

I glance around at the floor and the hedge walls, but see no one.

"No, no," says the voice. "Up here."

It's a cat, because of course it's a cat. It's white with orange spots near its tail and head, and its copper eyes betray no emotion as it stares down at me from above the entrance to this .

"You seem like you're in need of some guidance, young one."

"No," I say. "No, actually, I was just leaving." My legs help make this point as they carry me over to the left exit.

"Suit yourself," trails the voice as I walk away.

Okay, last time I went right, right, left, so this time I try right, right, right. Same result.

“Are you sure you don’t need help?” says this cat on the wall.

“Yes.”

Another attempt.

“What about now?” it says.

I say nothing as I take the left exit.

“Now?”

Again.

“Meow?”

I stand in the middle of the area and look up to see a black cat with copper eyes. I want to be angry, but mostly I’m caught off-guard. I stare.

“Uh.”

“Something the matter?” it says.

“Weren’t you a different cat before?”

“I’m not really certain what you mean.”

My eye twitches. I’m letting it get to me.

“You said you could help me?” I say.

“I know the way, certainly,” this cat says.

I’m hesitant to trust anyone here, but it’s not as if I have a lot of hope for what I’ve already been doing.

“Fine. Show me.”

“Really now, Esther,” it says as it hops down from the hedge and approaches the left exit, “there’s no need to be so terse.”

“You know my name,” I say, trying not to sound surprised.

“We’ve met before.”

As the cat makes a left turn, I’m trying to recall whether or not there were any cats the first time we were here. Something clicks.

“You’re... Charlotte?” I say. When we were 14, Alice got a cat that she named Charlotte. She’d named it after a cat we’d met in Woodreach—this cat, maybe. We never really talked about it, but I could always tell that this place stuck with her. Obviously, she’s not the only one.

“Your friend called me this, yes. I wouldn’t say it’s my name.”

“Okay, well, what *is* your name?” I say.

“I’ve been called many things by children like Alice,” it says, “but I don’t have a name. I’m a cat. Isn’t that enough?” It stops at a branching path, flicking its tail one way, then the other. We turn right. “The question I have on my mind is why you seem to be so sour with me. This is no way to talk to an old friend.”

I learned pretty early that you can’t really talk about your “theories” about portal otherworlds without ending up in some bad places. Your best case scenario is that everyone shrugs it off. I’m lucky I only ended up in therapy. From what I’ve gathered, though, I know at least this: what’s on the other side of a portal isn’t real, and it isn’t your friend. I can’t claim to understand everything, but I think that these worlds want something from us. Why else would someone just end up in a whole other reality? Why does everything in them always seem so personal? For example, why would this cat I met briefly ten years ago remember my name?

“I don’t really like it here,” I say.

“Nothing against me, then, mm?”

“Right,” I reply, half-lying. We make a couple more turns in silence.

Then I see the bench again. Only this time, I see it from the right. I audibly react, and this cat looks back at me, almost seeming smug. It crosses to the left exit, and I don't ask questions. A few more turns that don't make sense and we're staring out at a flat field with rows of cornstalks all across.

I look down at this cat.

"Thanks."

"It's really no trouble," it says. "You won't need any accompaniment on your journey, will you?"

"Um, no," I say. "I think I'd rather be alone right now."

"Of course. I understand. It was good seeing you, Esther."

"You, too," I lie, walking away from the maze without another beat.

"Alice, please don't touch it!"

"But she's adorable," Alice said, stroking the gray cat. It pressed its face into Alice's hand, melting into her touch. It closed its eyes and purred, then turned its head slowly to Esther, blinking its shiny brown eyes.

Esther crossed her arms.

"I just want to get out of here..."

Esther turned away from Alice and the cat, trying to get a glimpse of the way out of the maze. She was greeted by another pair of brown eyes. Esther glanced around, and everywhere she looked—in the bushes, on top of them, even sitting on the ground across from her—were dozens of those little eyes. More cats. But somehow the eyes always looked the same. Esther could feel the tears welling up again.

“A-Alice...”

“What is it now, Esthie?” Alice glanced up from the cat in front of her. Of course, there was nothing else here. “Esthie?”

Esther shook her head and wiped her nose. She said nothing, for fear that she would start sobbing.

“We’ll go, okay?” Alice said. “Maybe she knows the way. Right, Charlotte?”

The calico mewled and trotted its way to another branch of the maze.

Exhibit C: Aggression Factor

Walking along the dirt path, I notice in the distance that the sun is already starting to set. I got a pretty early start, so that shouldn’t be right... unless I spent a little more time in that maze than I thought. I pull my phone from my left pocket. 3:19. So either my phone is wrong or this place is. I’d like to go with the latter, for my own peace of mind. I guess, though, that it doesn’t really matter. I’m walking for maybe twenty minutes when I come across another stretch of woods. Somewhere nearby, I hear a stream trickling. A few more minutes, and I reach another grassy clearing. This one is more rectangular than the one I fell into in the first place, and is also the opposite of it in every respect. The ground is overgrown and uneven, and the edges aren’t quite as consistent. There are tree stumps and branches jutting out or invading here and there. It feels more natural than that other clearing, but it’s still not right. Now it feels *too* natural. Or maybe I’m just on edge. But I’d rather be paranoid than caught off-guard.

Peeking through some of the trees, I can see that the river I hear is a little ways down a sloped hill. I probably shouldn’t drink the water here; I brought my own, anyway. Nevermind that I’m not really hungry or thirsty. Ugh. That thought sickens me. Just being here is enough to

change how my digestive system works. I put down my backpack and take a seat on a fallen log. I start digging through my stuff. I tried to pack light: some food and a sleeping bag. Some part of me must have known I wouldn't have to eat, but again. Their rules, my rules. I'll hold onto what makes sense, even if I can't make a dent in what doesn't.

But now I hear a high-pitched noise echoing throughout the woods. And then a different noise. A different pitch, I guess. Someone's playing a flute, or something. I go to the edge of the clearing to get a look. Down by the bank, there's a small fire going, and two figures sitting on a rock and a stump.

While I'm having this thought, I notice that one of the figures has looked up at me. His big goat horns are pointed back, and he gestures for me to come down. God dammit. I step back into the middle of the clearing and pinch the bridge of my nose. What am I supposed to do? Just go around when they know I'm here? Dammit. I peer back down. The man waves at me while his companion stares into the fire. With a little groan, I inch my way down. As I do, I get a better look at the smaller of the two people. It's a mouselike man—he's more mouse than man, really, all gray fur and whiskers. It should be unsettling, but in the light of the fire, his beady black eyes seem shimmering and endearing.

The man with the goat horns I recognize as soon as I get close. I had a suspicion, but now I'm certain. We met the last time Alice and I were here, and I remember him especially. He's slouched on the rock, idly playing what I guess is a panflute. I clear my throat and he stops playing.

"Hello there, Esther," he says, a smile playing at his lips. I scan his dark stubble and puckish eyes and decide that I want to punch him in the face.

“Hey,” I say like I know him. I don’t, really—I don’t even know his name. But I’ve spent enough time hating him that I’m familiar enough.

“Lo,” says the mouse in an even and sleepy voice. I give him a glance of acknowledgment and notice that he’s nodding off a bit.

“What brings you this way?” says the goat.

“Just passing through,” I say.

“Well, then,” he starts with a grin, “as long as you’re around, why not join me and my companion?”

The mouse snorts in affirmation and leans to one side, threatening to fall right onto the ground. The goat grabs him by the shoulder and puts him back in an upright position.

“I’m not really sure I have time for that.”

“Nonsense!” the goat says, grabbing a large brown bottle from the ground. “Always time for a drink, ain’t there?” He takes a swig, then holds the bottle out to me.

Dammit. I definitely shouldn’t. But a drink sounds good right about now. I put my hand on the bottle, but don’t take it from him yet.

“What is it?”

“Whiskey.”

I pull it towards me and take a taste. It’s smoky, with a kind of sweet aftertaste. My dad might say something about it being “firm.” It stings my throat and warms my stomach. I take a longer swig.

“Thanks,” I say, and I hold the bottle out.

“Aw, keep it,” he says. “We’ve got more. You wanna sit?” He gestures to another rock by the fire.

I weigh my options. It's not like I particularly want to hang out with this guy, but it might be a good idea to take a rest. As long as he's not trying to take anything from me, I figure it's fine.

"Fine," I say. I sit down.

"That's more like it, eh? Cool night, warm fire."

I grunt in response, and then I drink a bit more whiskey. The silence isn't enough to make the goat uncomfortable, but it's clear he wants to fill it.

"You came back for another visit to Woodreach, then?"

"Cut the shit," I say. "You know why I'm here."

"Yeah," he says, "I do."

I drink.

"Not much for light conversation, though, are you?" he says.

"So they say," I shoot back, proving it.

"Sharp as a knife, though, hm." There's a few seconds of silence while he stares into the fire. I take another drink before putting the bottle down on the ground. I'm already starting to feel it and being drunk probably isn't the best idea right now. "Well, it's alright," he finally says. "I'm not so good at conversation. I'd really like to play a game."

I'm not eager to humor this guy at all, really. But what I am is a little tipsy and a little too curious.

"A game?"

"You like games, don't you?"

Alice liked games. I'm neutral on them at best. I don't see any harm in pursuing this a bit.

"What game?"

“Poker,” says the faun. “You know five card draw?”

Admittedly, I do. My mom’s girlfriend and their friends play occasionally, and I’ve sat in on a few of those games. But there’s something I’m much more concerned about.

“What would we bet?” I say, squinting.

“Oh, you—oh!” The faun gives a hearty laugh. “Don’t worry, it’s nothing like last time we met. No, no, not for those kinds of stakes. A fair game, even odds. We don’t play for chips or coins... we play for questions.”

“Questions?”

“Ah, I see you’ve played before, but slow down! You haven’t won a hand yet.” Another obnoxious chuckle. “Questions indeed. The winner of a hand asks one question, and the loser must answer truthfully.”

My eyes widen at this. As certain as I am that I can’t trust this faun, I’m more sure that I have questions that I want answered.

“How do we know if one of us is telling the truth?” I prod.

“Another great question! On a roll, Esther,” he says, and I roll my eyes. “Luckily, that whiskey you and I just shared wasn’t just any alcohol. You can’t lie. Not even in your head. Try it.”

I do my best to tell a lie and find that he’s right. I can’t even come up with one. Just another way this place can mess with me. At this point, I give.

“Alright. I’ll play,” I say.

“Fantastic! I’ll get us set up,” the faun says, and then stands to lift his companion from the tree stump. The mouse snorts, and then shifts right back into snoring. He’s out cold. The faun gently lowers him into a resting position a few feet away from the fire. Then he pulls a deck of

playing cards out from his khaki cargo shorts. He sits on the ground and sets the deck down on the stump. “You don’t mind sitting on the ground, do you?”

“Sure,” I say, set my backpack down, and take a seat across from him.

“Well, then,” he says, “let’s begin.”

As we play the first round, it occurs to me that I’m a bit rusty. He shows up with a pair of eights and a pair of tens, and I end up with a pair of nines. I grit my teeth as he shuffles the deck. Cool. More talking for me.

“First question, then,” the faun says, continuing a one-handed shuffle. “And this one’s easy. Why are you here?”

“Didn’t we already—”

“Ah! I’m the one asking the question, Miss Esther. I know why I think you’re here. I want to know why you think you’re here.”

“Fine. Fine,” I say, massaging my cheeks. I’m really feeling that whiskey now. “I’m here to find Alice. She went missing.”

“Sorry to hear. Her disappearance must have been hard on you,” the faun says.

“No,” I say, “not really. Let’s just play another hand.”

“Fine by me,” he says. He deals out new cards.

Another drawing round. I end with a pair of sixes and a pair of threes and he ends with three sevens. I groan.

“Don’t worry, you’ll find your rhythm,” he says with a smirk. “What happened between you and Alice?”

“What happened?”

“Yeah, y’know. You two seemed close. You’re back, but you don’t seem so fond of her anymore.”

“I—I guess it’s hard to pinpoint what ‘happened,’” I say, genuinely stumped. After I think for a second, I say “Alice was always kind of... pushy.”

The faun nods. Ironically, he doesn’t seem like such a bad listener.

“She pressured me into a lot of stuff. Or, uh, out of a lot of stuff, I guess. It didn’t really matter. Mostly, she would try to make me feel guilty. Like, if I hung out with someone she didn’t like or something, she would ghost me for awhile. I think—”

I stop when I notice the faun squinting inquisitively.

“Oh. Ghosting is when you stop talking to someone,” I clarify. “I never asked, but I think—she always kind of resented me?”

“Resented you for what?”

“I guess I don’t know,” I say. “Point is, she had this way of... making you fight for her attention. It didn’t really matter what you did. I tried to talk to her about it, but she never really stopped. Eventually, I just got fed up. I told her I never wanted to talk to her again. And then I didn’t. We were probably 16, or something.”

“I see,” the faun says, dealing out another hand. We play it in silence again. I play like shit—king high. The faun plays worse. Queen high.

“Okay,” I say. The moment I’ve been waiting for. “What brought me and Alice here?”

“What brought you here?” the faun ponders. “You came yourself, yeah?”

“No, not like that. It’s not like anyone can just waltz in here whenever they want, right?”

“I guess not.”

“So why us?” I say.

“Hey. Your guess is as good as mine,” he says. Great. No dice. He deals another hand, and we trade our shitty luck. I end with a queen high. He ends with an ace high. “Well, well. We’ve established why you hate Alice. But why do you seem like you hate me?”

Wait, what?

“Are you kidding me?” I say.

“No, no, it’s my turn.” He gives me another stupid grin.

“You know what you took from me.”

“Certainly. I can give it back, if you’d like.”

“No,” I say. “No, I don’t want it back.”

“So it wasn’t valuable to you,” he says. “You don’t miss it. Why are you angry?”

“Because I don’t like it!” I snap. “I don’t like that there are things here that can change me. Can change how I behave. I don’t like that there are labyrinths that don’t make sense, and that I don’t get hungry or thirsty. I don’t like whiskey that makes me tell the truth! That really pisses me off! I don’t like it here. I don’t like you.”

The faun isn’t shocked, but my rant is enough to give him pause. He stares down at the stump and nods.

“You think what I did changed you?” he says at last.

“I—” I sigh. “I don’t know. But I don’t like that I’m not sure. I don’t like to think that it could’ve.”

“Do you like who you are now?” the faun says.

“Sometimes,” I say.

“Hm.” He deals another hand, and we play. We tie again with a pair of threes, but I get a queen high. I jump at the opportunity.

“What does this place want?” I say.

The faun raises an eyebrow, like he’s getting tired of me.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he says.

“Look, you don’t know why we’re here. But there must be something gained. Someone must want something. Like what you took from me.”

The faun shakes his head. He reaches into a satchel behind him and pops open another bottle. He takes a swig.

“Don’t know,” he exhales. He thinks for a moment. “There’s something you need to understand. To you, you came here from somewhere else. Here to there, right? I bet that really struck you. But to me, your ‘there’ is ‘here.’ I’m just a part of it, and I see kids like you come and go all the time.” He pauses for a drink. “Well, the kids are usually younger than you. But you see my point.”

“I don’t.”

He shakes his head.

“Look, maybe there’s some cosmic reason that people like you come here. But I’m not part of it. Not any more than my sleeping friend here.” He gestures towards the mouse. “Not any more than those cats. To us, you were just some kid who fell in a ditch. And now you’re just an angry chick looking for her girlfriend.”

There’s a second where that almost gets a rise out of me.

“Then how do you all remember us?” I say.

“Most of us don’t really forget much. Hard to. For better or worse.”

I turn to the fire again.

“As for whether or not what I did was wrong,” he continues, taking another drink, “I don’t really care. But I did it for my amusement and nothing else.”

“Yeah, well, I’m glad it amused you.”

“Like I said, it doesn’t make a difference to me.”

I glance up and notice the sky is starting to brighten up again. There’s no way it could have been that long, but I don’t really have it in me to care. I grab my backpack.

“I should get going,” I say, “but I have one more question.”

“I’ll give you a freebie,” he says.

“What’s your name?”

“Hector Maurice Ernie Merlin Finch.”

I nod. I’ve heard what I needed to. I stand and walk away, stepping over the slumbering mouse. I don’t look back once as I get back on the path home.

“Excuse me, sir, can you help us?” Alice said. They had been in this place for a few minutes and seemed to have lost the way home.

“Of course” replied the tall, dark-haired man with horns. “What’s your name, kid?”

“I’m Alice, sir,” she replied.

“And you, young one,” he said, pointing to the whimpering child standing behind Alice, “may I have your name?”

“O-Okay...” the child said. “It’s—” But suddenly it was nothing.

“Blank, right? It’s natural after you let someone have your name,” said the goat man.

“Yes, I’ll be keeping this one. But I’m no monster. I’ll let you have another. I think your name is Esther.”

“What?” said the child, whose name was now Esther.

“I believe you’ll find your way home in that direction,” the goat man said, pointing out of the woods.

“I see!” said Alice. “Thank you very much, sir. Come on, Esther, let’s go.”

Alice took Esther’s hand and led her away, but Esther couldn’t stop staring back at the goat man. He gave a little wave as they went.

“You’re welcome, Esther.”

Exhibit D: Ponerology

“It’s true what he said, you know.”

I glance to my right. There’s a grey cat with copper eyes sitting on the side of the road. I don’t stop walking as I reply.

“Yeah, I know. It literally had to be true.”

Another cat—orange with black stripes—pops out of a bush and starts walking alongside me.

“I just mean there’s no reason for you to hate us,” it says.

I pick up my pace a little bit, hoping I can leave this cat behind.

“Maybe I was a little overzealous about not trusting you,” I say, “but that doesn’t mean I have to like you.”

“I understand,” it says, and I’m not certain it does. “Though it’s also not like you’ve gotten to know us at all.”

“It’s not like Alice knew you.”

“That’s a fair point. But she at least saw us as something to be known. Something real.”

I don't have a response to that. It's pretty much right. I grunt. The bruise on the back of my right leg is definitely sore.

"And you?" this cat says.

"And me what?" I say.

"We can see you are a lot of things, Esther, but you are not stupid. New information gives us new feelings. Perspectives. What are you thinking now?"

I roll my eyes. I was never really a cat person. It's right again, though, unfortunately. On many accounts. And I let something out that I'm having trouble with. As long as we're telling the truth, I guess.

"I think I'm scared."

"Is that so."

"I guess I spent a long time thinking none of this was real. That it was a front, meant to trick us. Now I don't really know what to think. Satisfied?"

"Hm," it says. "Not that we know much about where you're from, but we once heard a saying from someone passing through. 'Truth is stranger than fiction.' One wonders where reality lands with that sentiment." A silence lingers between the two of us. "Should we say that you're real to us? Or true? Fictional? Strange?"

I say nothing. I get the point.

"You must know we're getting close," this cat says. "What else are you afraid of?"

"Two things," I say. "One is that she's exactly the same as she was when I knew her."

I give a nod to no one in particular while I decide that I really mean this.

"And the other thing?" says this cat.

"That she's changed."

Maybe I'm being dramatic. Or maybe I'm still feeling the whiskey and there's always a bit of truth in drama. Either way, this cat says nothing.

And then I see it come into view. A cottage, crooked and imperfect and overgrown, surrounded by a few layers of thicket. It's beautiful and cozy in an screwy, asymmetrical way. Like an optical illusion you figured out years ago. Out of all things, I remember this clearly.

Coming to the door, I realize I'm not really certain what's about to happen. Back at home, Alice is missing. There are people who love her, and care about her, and would like to see her come home. At the right angle, I can see myself being one of these people. That hasn't changed.

But I've also been framing it wrong. At first, I thought I came here to rescue Alice. Search. Retrieve. A daring quest for the damsel in distress. I realize, now, that there's no reason for me to think that Alice is trapped here. I don't have a reason to think that anything in Woodreach has ulterior motives—or that Woodreach itself, somehow, has ulterior motives. It's a place like any other. And it's a place Alice came to by choice. That's the real important part. If she's choosing to be here, there's nothing for me to save her from. I'm not sure what I would be if I didn't let her make her own choices.

A cat brushes up against my leg. This one has a white coat, with spots around its tail. I realize I've been standing outside the cottage for a few minutes.

"You're hesitating." It's not an accusation. I don't really think it's an observation, either. It's just a statement.

"Yeah," I say. I knock on the door.

There's no answer.

I let myself in.

Esther stood in the corridor, staring at the door with the padlocked chain over it. She could see light shining underneath. The sound of birds chirping streamed through the crack.

“Alice,” she said, “we can go home. Can you give me the key?”

“No,” Alice said.

“What?”

“No,” she repeated. “Esthie, we don’t have to go home. Things are better here. They’re more interesting! You don’t wanna go back to our boring lives, do you? Back to Christian camp?”

“Alice, I...” Esther had gone through plenty of emotions that day. She was scared. She was anxious. She was upset. Now, she was furious. She gritted her teeth. “We need to go home!” Esther shouted, tackling Alice to the ground. “Gimme the key!”

“What are you doing? Esther, stop!” Alice said, trying to wrestle her off.

“You can’t keep telling me what to do!” A hard thud echoed through the basement as Esther’s fist connected with Alice’s face. “Oh no. Alice?” Esther called. She was out cold. She reached into Alice’s pocket and grabbed the key. She struggled to pick her up. She would have to drag her back.

Exhibit E: Hamartiology

The inside of the cottage isn’t quite what I remember. It’s close enough, with some minor changes. The dark hardwood floor, the light green paint job on the walls. There’s more bookshelves than I remember, with more books than I could probably ever read in one lifetime. Glancing around, I pick out *Chronicles of Narnia* and *Peter Pan*, but there’s a bunch of titles I’ve never even heard of. I cross the living room and into an archway between two shelves. It’s a

dining room with a low oak table. I scan the room, and cast my gaze on the cased opening to my right. It's a kitchen. There's someone washing dishes.

Her blonde hair is pulled into a messy ponytail. She used to keep it down and straight. She's wearing a gray knit sweater, sleeves rolled up. Her whole outfit is kind of ruffled, unconcerned, like she's just come back from somewhere, or like she wasn't planning on seeing anyone at all. She puts a plate in the dishrack next to her and turns to me.

"Hi, Esthie." Even when she's not at her best, there's something about her that's... presentable.

"Hey," I say. "Hey, Alice."

"How are you?" Alice says. It's a normal, innocent question, which naturally means it is not a question that I was expecting.

"Fine." Christ. What's after that? "How are you?"

"Good," she says. "I'm doing well for myself lately. I've got my own place now."

It occurs to me that she's talking about the cottage. That puts a knot in my stomach.

"Go ahead and sit down. I'll make some coffee."

I do what she says, because what else am I supposed to do? She tinkers with a coffee maker in the kitchen. That's also new. Or maybe I just forgot about it. I put my face in my hands. All of this shit and I haven't even planned what I'm going to say to her.

"You still take your coffee black?" she calls.

"One cream, one sugar," I say, straightening out.

"Hm," she intones. She almost sounds disappointed. "Okay."

There's some clinking in the kitchen, and she comes out with the two coffees. Sets them down on the table. There's a bit of steam rising from them. Alice takes a seat.

“So,” says Alice, folding her hands on the table, “what brings you through Woodreach?”

“Alice,” I say, “you know. You know why I’m here.”

“I do. But it’s not going to be like last time.”

When I first got here, I thought it might be. But now I know now she’s right.

“... I won’t make you,” I say.

“Thanks,” she says.

She reaches down to grab her coffee. It’s much lighter than mine. She brings it to her lips, but then decides it’s too hot. I take a sip of my own and let it scald my tongue and throat.

“But I am going to ask you,” I add. “Alice, I want you to come back with me.”

“Give me a good reason.”

I think for a second. I could give her a few reasons that I think are good enough. But I’m trying to tread lightly here. I shake my head.

“Let’s not start with the counterargument,” I say. “Tell me why you’re here.”

“Why shouldn’t I be here?” says Alice. “There’s nothing for me back home.”

“What? Come on, Alice, what does that mean?”

“It *means* there’s nothing. You... heard I dropped out of college, right?”

I did hear, in fact, from Alice’s parents. They were family friends, and even after Alice and I fell out, our parents kept in touch.

“Yeah, I heard.”

“My parents are pissed,” she says.

“I’m sure they were angry,” I say, “but you know they’re worried sick about you.”

“I don’t see what it matters. What good am I to them? I’m a stupid failure.”

“You’re not stupid,” I say. “You’re not a failure.”

“I appreciate that, Esther,” she says, “but it’s been six years. You don’t have a clue.”

That shuts me up. I take a sip of coffee. It doesn’t burn now, but it’s still hot.

“Plus,” she adds, “it’s not like I have any friends.”

“You must have friends,” I say. Of course, I still don’t have a clue.

“Not really. Not after you.”

I cross my arms, digging my nails into my right forearm.

“I didn’t really keep up with anyone after high school,” she continues. “And in college...

I don’t know. I knew some people, but they were mostly at arms’ length.”

There’s a “why?” hanging in the air. I don’t need to say it.

“I didn’t want to hurt anyone. Or get hurt. Like us.”

I put my mug back down on the table.

“I affected you that much?” I say.

“How would you not have?” she says. “Do you actually remember how things ended?”

I shrug.

“I remember being pissed off,” I say.

“I—” Alice cuts herself off, pinching the bridge of her nose. “Man, I’m gonna sound like an insane person. I saved the voicemail.”

“Huh?”

“The voicemail, I—” She’s digging in her pocket for her phone. “I don’t know. You’ll get it if I show you.”

She put her phone down in the middle of the table, the volume icon fading from the screen. There were a few seconds of white noise. And then my voice.

“Alice, answer me! God, you garbage bag, why is it always something with you? Why can’t you just talk like a normal person? I thought we were done with this!” Something wooden slams in the background. “I’m doing my best. I’ve been trying to be patient! Alice, I can see you posting on your blog. It’s been days. What the hell is going on? Am I a joke to you?” There’s a pause. “Stacey was right. You’re a nightmare.” I sigh on the line at the same time that I sigh now. “Whatever. I’m done this time. It’s a trainwreck to know you, Alice.”

Alice locks her phone, pulling it over to her side of the table.

“I wasn’t even trying to mess with you that time,” she says. “I just wanted space.”

I shake my head. I’m shocked, but...

“I’m not sorry I said it. You could have told me. It’s not my fault I didn’t trust you.”

“I know that,” she says. “I don’t need you to be sorry. I wasn’t a good person. I just don’t get why you’re here pretending like you care.”

I squint.

“I can have meant all of that and still not want you to spend your life in some bizarro purgatory—”

“Esther, I like it here!” says Alice. “Your feelings aren’t going to change that.”

I push my glasses up and press my palms into my eyelids.

“Ugh. I know,” I say. “I guess I wanted to save you. This place always felt unreal to me, so I thought—I thought maybe it was something evil. Something trying to trick one or both of us. But it’s really just weird. I don’t get it, but that doesn’t mean there’s something wrong.”

“You wanted to... save me?” she says.

I put my hands down on the table. I let out a sigh.

“Yeah,” I say. “I did.”

“Why?”

“What—what do you mean why?” I say.

There’s a tense pause between us. I guess I’m not even certain why. Or, I haven’t been. But now that she’s really right in front of me...

“Because you were my best friend,” I say. “I guess I’ve spent a lot of time being angry, but...” My voice is starting to crack. I take a breath and swallow. “I missed you, Alice.”

“I missed you, too.”

There’s a moment where we’re quiet again. There’s a lot going on in that silence. For a second, it seems like this is how the conversation could end. Of course, that was never going to happen. Alice frowns and ends the moment.

“I like it here,” she repeats. “It’s everything I could want. A cozy place. Charlotte.”

I wince when something brushes against my legs. A white cat with green eyes. It mews, jumping up on the table and crossing over to Alice.

“Are you sure you should call it Charlotte?”

“What do you mean? That’s her name.”

“It just. Told me something else,” I say.

“Esthie, what are you even talking about?” she says.

“Nevermind. Nevermind.”

I take another sip of coffee and realize my stomach hurts. I don’t know what I’m supposed to say next.

“You really won’t come home?” is what I settle on.

“No. I’m not planning on it.”

I close my eyes. The gears are turning in my head, and it probably shows on my face. This is it, then, isn't it? I can't force Alice to do something she doesn't want to do. Just like I couldn't make her change when we were teenagers, either. A person should only make decisions for themselves. So my next question is,

“What am I supposed to tell your parents?”

“You can tell them what you want,” she says, shaking her head. “It's not your responsibility to do that, though, is it?”

There's a choice for me, too, then. Delightful.

“Fine.” I take a beat to finish my coffee. “I should probably go.”

“You don't have to,” she says, but I'm already standing up.

“Yes, I do.” I pick my backpack up from the floor. I go through the kitchen and down into the basement. It's completely different from the rest of the cottage. Cold, gray, cavernous walls. A breeze runs out from under the door. I see that Alice put the key and the padlock down on the floor. She can leave whenever she wants. I glance behind me to see her standing there with a cinnamon-colored cat on her shoulder. “Goodbye, Alice.”

“Bye, Esthie,” she says after a second.

I'm reaching for the door when she calls out to me.

“Maybe I'll come back someday,” Alice says. “You and I could try again.”

“I don't know about that,” I say. I open the door, and then glance back again. “Hope you come back.”

I leave then, and I'm back in the woods, no ditch or hole in sight. I hear birds chirping high above me. No portal otherworld. I let out a groan. I don't know if I made the right choice. I'll live with it for now, though, I think as I walk back to my car.